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BENJAMIN CHAPIN

and His Portrayal of

LINCOLN

by Izola Forrester

SITTING opposite Benjamin Chapin in his study the other evening, I looked at him, wondering how old he was, this man who has given his generation a great living portrayal of Abraham Lincoln.

There is a boyish look to the lean, clean-shaven face. When he smiles the lines deepen around his deep-set hazel eyes and firmly chiseled mouth, just as you see them in the early smooth shaven portraits of the great Liberator, back in the old days of the Black Hawk War and courtship of sweet Ann Rutledge.

As he smiles whimsically back at you, long, slender fingertips touching, eyes half closed, knees crossed, you think he is thirty-five. Then, all at once, the face calm, settling into a curiously resigned repose, the eyes have a shadowy, faraway look, and you decide he is forty. Yet, I do not know.

For years he has given up his whole life to one ideal. It has been a life of struggle and persistence, of great sustaining faith, and patient, unwavering belief, not unlike the experiences of the wonderful man he has sought to portray to the American public. This is the story of Benjamin Chapin and his rendition of the character of Lincoln.

From the very first inception of the idea he was assured and even warned that the public would never stand for any impersonation of the most beloved figure in American history, the man who reached the hearts of the meanest of his fellow-countrymen and left a shrine there, the martyred President.

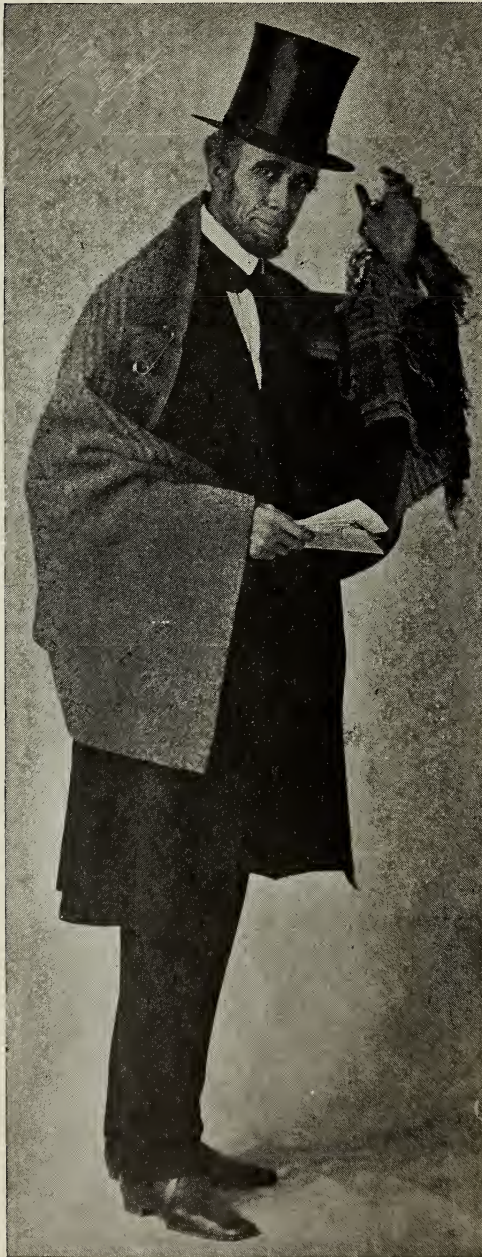
It meant years of preparation, almost of consecration to an ideal. Looking now at his face, you catch the same fleeting

impression that comes from the face and eyes of any man or woman who has followed a star through the long night. You find it in Lincoln's wonderful eyes and patient face. You can trace it in Scott's and Nansen's, the explorers. It is in Tesla's, in Marconi's faces, and in Edison's. It is the look of Nietzsche's Beyond Man, the human being who dares to shoot arrows of longing toward the ideal and who seeks to follow their flight.

"I was only a boy when the first desire came to me to place a living Lincoln before the people, who should still speak his message to them, and carry to them the vivid memory of his actual presence." Chapin paused, looking ahead of him in silence for a moment, before the deepening wrinkles at eyes and mouth gave a glint of quick humor to the rest of the speech. "You see even then I was pretty lengthy and perhaps a bit awkward, but I found I could talk, and that people would listen to me, and when they did they stopped looking at my legs."

It was the determination of ambitious, yet reverent youth, inspired by the highest ideals. It meant exacting study and research through the best part of his youth and early manhood. Back in Bristolville, Ohio, there are many people who can tell you of "Ben" Chapin's first appearance in public. It was at a school picnic. Can't you dip back into memory's grab bag and recall a school picnic when you sat up on a fence and ate June strawberry shortcake till all the world turned to peace and beauty? This was just that kind of a country school picnic, out in a grove, and before the games they had the closing school exercises of the year.

The audience, seated around under the great oaks and maples, settled themselves with the usual air of hushed expectancy as each pupil advanced to the front of the rudely built board platform. Young



MR. BENJAMIN CHAPIN
in his inimitable Lincoln impersonation

Chapin was to speak a rather lively selection on the subject of "Lightning Rods," a subject that at the time was touched with plenty of local humor.

During the rehearsals, under the careful supervision of his teacher, "Ben" had been sing-songing along with the rest; but the minute he stood on the platform, and faced a real live audience for the first time, he cut loose like a wild colt. There are some who can still tell you of the electric shock that hit the picnic when those long arms started waving, and the mobile, expressive face seemed fairly to glow with inspiration, while his voice carried them away. From that hour they talked of "Ben" as the coming orator in that country community, and his local reputation was firmly established.

He was sixteen when the first appreciation of the sinews of war came to him. He wanted to go through college, and it cost money, so he started out to get it. There was a country school just south of Bristolville, famous for the speed and ease with which it disposed of teachers. The last one had resigned with celerity and no arguments. Although a man of forty years and experienced, he had balked when the big boys of the district brought a fence rail accommodately up to the very steps of the little schoolhouse for his means of locomotion.

Chapin set his eye on that particular school and smiled beamingly over the fence rail episode. Only a few months before, the school directors had because of his youth, refused his application to teach that very school. Here was the opportunity to use nerve.

He told the school trustees that if they would give him the school he would make it as good as any in the township or they needn't pay him a cent. Possibly from a dearth of the adventurous type of older teachers, possibly from far-sighted economy, they decided to give the lean tempter of Providence a chance to save the school board money.

He got the school. It was a very patient, good-tempered, even conciliatory youth who faced the expectant

aggregation of pupils the first day, but at the first sign of mutiny under discipline, history states, he turned from the blackboard, took the desk in one flying leap, collared the two leaders, and discussed the matter personally with them out in the woodshed.

The school trustees paid his salary in full at the end of the term.

Lincoln never set his face more happily toward his law books than Chapin did toward higher education after that backwoods teaching.

"There were ten of us, I remember, who graduated the next year from the town high school," he said, swinging one foot reminiscently. "Ten, and I was valedictorian. At the New Lyme Institute, later, I was class poet, but I managed to recover from that attack. Then I went on to Boston to study, and finally came here to New York to get the right line on dramatic interpretation and playwriting. I was giving lectures and dramatic recitals to pay my way along.

"But I wanted to carry out my first ambition. I wanted to interpret Lincoln's message of peace and humanitarianism to the country he loved. I knew there was no such dramatic vehicle waiting for me. If I wanted it, I would have to write it myself. So, gradually, I began to build around that idea. For years I worked and saved with this end in view, and finally I went back to Bristolville. If I could appear before those old friends and neighbors and make them forget 'Ben' Chapin and listen to 'Abe' Lincoln, I knew I could do it with the rest of the country."

So Bristolville had one of its few real shocks after eleven years' absence, when there came back the same lean, long-limbed boy, a little older, a little easier in his manners, but still the same cheery, whimsical boy they remembered well.

Rumor spread that he had brought with him two large trunks of books, a typewriter and a real, live secretary. Civic pride was stirred to its deepest depth over Benjamin, but it certainly yearned to know his ulterior motives.

Seriously speaking, though, no man ever applied himself more assiduously to his task than Chapin did to the drama which

was to be the crowning ambition of his life. He fairly lived and breathed Lincoln until he could talk for hours at a time, quoting nothing but the marvelous words left behind to the world in Lincoln's speeches. About this time, too, he began to interest many prominent men in his work, among them the late Secretary John Hay, who had served as private secretary to Lincoln during the war.

Not the least in importance of detail of the preparations was the question of proper garb. There still lived many who could recall the famous figure in the tall hat, shawl, and long Prince Albert coat so familiar around the Capitol and along the firing line that faced the Southern troops. Mr. Chapin learned from some of these that the President's hat and clothes had been given to the National Museum at Washington, and armed with a letter from the Secretary of State to the custodian of the Museum, he went in search of these. After diligent search they found Lincoln's hat, the same, well-known old tile, down in a square wooden box in the basement, with the cover screwed tightly down. Then he found the coat, vest and trousers, the last worn by Lincoln, and they were all carefully duplicated for the man who hoped to present to the generation of today a faithful, reverent prototype of the six-foot four President. Anyone who has seen him in the character cannot fail to recall the first keen thrill of astonishment and almost awe at sight of the beloved, lanky form and first dawning smile on the homely, tender face.

Going back to Bristolville with the costume made in Washington, Chapin decided that his first appearance as the living Lincoln should be made among his home folks. And dressed in the duplicate clothing, and "made up" with the marvelous fidelity to life, he made his first call on his old home physician, Dr. Brinkerhoff and family, who had known him all his life. The doctor sat awed, pleased, surprised, happy, listening to Lincoln stories and Lincoln philosophy, all given as he felt the President would have done. Chapin's experiment was voted a success; he had not cheapened their ideal of Lincoln, but rather had made Lincoln seem real to them. It was the spirit of the work

that Chapin was from the start to have and to hold.

On the very next evening, a bolder stroke was decided upon. Most of the people of the little town had gathered into a big hall to get the first election returns, which were carried to the hall from the depot by swift messengers.

The returns were mostly in, and things had begun to lág for the crowd, when all at once, as the clock stuck eleven, the center hall door opened and down the aisle walked the very living image of Abraham Lincoln. It was as if the martyred President had stepped out of the picture frame to join the cheering crowds. The hush that came over the assemblage was tense and almost fearful, until relieved by the easy, slow, cheery voice telling them Lincoln stories and soon making them feel free and easy as the Lincoln of old would have done.

"Who is it?" asked the old timers, after the tall ungainly figure had finished speaking. That night Chapin got more cheers than the elected candidates.

This was the beginning of the realized ideal, the effort to create a dramatic vehicle in which Lincoln would be the dominant factor. Not unlike Joseph Jefferson's first efforts as "Rip Van Winkle" were these months of steady, indomitable striving and forging ahead toward the goal. Lincoln, in spite of his serious side, was always the keenest humorist, and most entertaining talker, and Chapin's subtle art in conveying this most elusive side of his nature has been frequently compared to Jefferson's art in "Rip."

Two years of devotion and sacrifice followed. Sometimes the whole fabric had to be unraveled and woven over again. He spent months visiting the haunts and homes of Lincoln, and talked with hundreds of persons who had known him intimately in his early days, or the last years at Washington.

Chapin's first real success came with a series of dramatic Lincoln monologues made up of scenes from the Lincoln dramas that he was then writing. By dint of hard work and belief in himself and his life task, Chapin completed a Lincoln drama that managers liked. In the spring of

1906 it was produced and staged by the young author-actor himself, in one of New York's best theaters. The first night was an unusual one, even for New York. Scattered throughout the audience were men who had known the great President in real life, men who possibly felt they were about to witness a play which was almost a sacrilege, seeking as it did to put on the stage the mighty, beloved figure still fresh in the memories of men.

There was a strange hush over the audience when the President came upon the stage, and then almost an unconscious sinking back into seats in relieved suspense. Here was no caricature, no crude imitation, no garish, ranting representation, but it was, indeed, as one great writer remarked, the man himself. Gentle, whimsical, humorous, yet rising in emergencies to the command over the very souls and bodies of the men who questioned his right to do the things he did, here was the veritable Lincoln whom they had known and loved.

Some of Mr. Chapin's best prized memories are from the visits made to his dressing room during the period of the play's first run, by the old timers who greeted the young actor with emotion and thanks for the gift he was making his generation.

The next season he produced two or three one-act Lincoln plays as a headline feature in the best vaudeville theaters. With one of them he made a later tour of the western cities also.

In 1909, after he had fully tested the public's appreciation of his portrayal, Chapin reproduced his four-act play revised, under the title "Lincoln at the White House," at the Garden Theater in New York, and later at the Hackett, now the Harris Theater.

For the past ten years Mr. Chapin has been in great demand at Universities, associations and lyceums to give dramatic interpretations and dramatic portrayals of Lincoln. When time would permit, he has accepted engagements of this character. Recently he gave a "Lincoln Character Portrayal" before the Michigan State Teachers Association (seven thousand teachers) meeting at Ann Arbor, Michigan; also at the University of Illinois, where he was introduced by President

James. His date book is kept filled up for months ahead.

It is a long, hard fight that he has won, this tall, patient-eyed man with the youthful face, and eyes full of age-old wisdom and knowledge of suffering. It is certain to all who have followed his career that years of dwelling on the splendid character have had their effect on his own life.

"When I face issues, big or little," he said, musingly, "I catch myself asking myself the question, 'What would Lincoln have done in a case like this?'"

So he stands out today. He has held faithfully to his ideal. He has set his course by the North Star, as they say, and has intensified the love and affection of the American people for the man who bound the Union together, and taught men to loose the bonds of fellow-men. The dignity, humor and gentle, rare humanity of his characterization are beyond description.

He tells one little story of a recent trip through Kentucky and Southern Illinois, taken in connection with a series of motion picture dramas which he is preparing, dealing with important incidents in Lincoln's life. Clad in the usual costume, his

shawl wrapped about him in the keen December air, he was walking quickly along the sidewalk in front of the old home at Springfield, when suddenly he came upon an old, bent figure, hobbling along with a cane, an old-fashioned knit woolen muffler wound many times around his neck, and his cap pulled well forward. But at sight of the figure just about to turn in at the gate, the old man stopped, leaned forward, and extended his arms with a glad cry,

"Mah Gord, Marse Lincoln!"

It took some persistent explaining to make the old darky see his mistake. He was certain he had seen the President's wraith, for, many a time as a little boy, he had watched the same figure, apparently, swing through that gate, and go up to the house.

"Ah doan't hole ter no triffin' 'round wid de unseen, but he shore does look jes' like Marse Lincoln's own self, dat young man. Ah hope it' gwine ter bring him luck,"

It has so far, luck, and the love, too, and warm friendship of those who knew the real Lincoln, and have grown to appreciate Benjamin Chapin, the man who bears Lincoln's message to the world of today.

THE EVENING STAR

THE twilight deepens; shining from afar
Through sombre darkness lo! the evening star!
While softly falls a peace upon the earth
And naught of tumult may its beauty mar.

The tired world hath sought its quiet bed,
And over all a benediction's spread;
While resting from their cares alike they sleep
The wayworn living and the placid dead.

The evening star shines on them both, and we
Are wrapped like them in God's eternity.
What matters it that one is here called dead
And one as living? All is mystery.

O mystery of life and death, we know
Not here thy riddle; but we onward go
To greater heights where we shall find
The longed-for answer, and Life's meaning know.

—*Marian Longfellow.*

One of Morgan's Men

by Eleanor Duncan Wood

GIRL of the yellow roses,
In the glow of a bygone day,
Dark were your eyes with dreaming,
Wistful your smile away.
And I your gay young lover
Had small chance of wooing you then;
For you were a girl of Kentucky,
And I, one of Morgan's Men.

I can see you yet as you waited
'Neath the elm by the old yard gate,
And your heart beat fast as my horse's hoofs,
For Young Love had found his mate.
High were my hopes and my heart, dear,
I laughed at your bodings then.
And I left you My Lady of Roses,
To ride with Morgan's Men.

Scurry of hoofs on the moonlit road,
Flashing of swords in flight.
Daredevil song 'midst the roar of guns,
Daredevil charge through the night.
Here with the twilight shadows
There, when day broke again;
Like the bolt of the fierce white lightning
Was the rush of Morgan's Men.

But the War was not for our winning,
Girl of the days of yore!
Outworn we were and outnumbered,
Beaten and bruised and sore.
Yet from Defeat you called me
Back to your heart again,
And lifted your loyal lips to my kiss.
Alas for Morgan's Men!

Love, the breath of your roses
Was never half so sweet,
As your smile when into the Way of Peace
You guided my weary feet.
And that smile is still my sunshine,
And the dreams you were dreaming then
Have all come true for a fellow,
Who was one of Morgan's Men.